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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

FRANKLIN was one of the ablest of the able men whom the the American republic numbers amongst her fathers and founders, and like most of them, he was a "self-made" man, as those are generally designated who have been the architects of their own fortunes. If he had been a mere politician of great talent and eloquence, like Patrick Henry, the half-lawyer, half-farmer, who drove his own cow to the market, and then made the senate house resound with his denunciations of British tyranny, he would have been entitled to a large share of the attention of every student of history for the influence he exerted in the councils of the United States in the most perilous days of their existence. But he was something more than statesman, politician, or patriot. He was a man of singular energy and perseverance, possessed of far-sightedness, and clearness of judgment which in an eastern country would have classed him among the sages; a philosopher of great accuracy, great penetration, and wonderful originality, and, above and beyond all these, a man of such sterling worth and stainless purity of character, that none of his enemies, even in the heat of a furious and unnatural conflict, ever could allege aught against him that he had need to be ashamed of. He possessed in himself such wonderful versatility of genius, and the story of his life presents such a wonderful variety of incident, men, and places, that no one, no matter what may be his position or employment, can ever read it without being improved by it.

He was the scion of one of those old English families of yeomanry, which were once so numerous. His ancestors occupied a farm of some thirty acres of freehold in Northamptonshire, time out of memory, probably before Duke William landed at Hastings, when a Saxon name was a title of honour. Finding the land insufficient for their support, the kin of the estate invariably eked out a livelihood by following the trade of a blacksmith in his native village. When the doctrines of the Reformation found their way into England, the Franklins were amongst the earliest to embrace them, and faithfully adhered to them through all the terrors of Mary's reign; and when, in the time of Charles II., many hundreds of the church clergy bore a noble testimony to true liberty, by abandoning the church of England, the Franklins were amongst the first to join the ranks of the despised and persecuted sectaries who preferred the conventicles to the parish church. But the conventicles were at that period a special abomination in the eyes of the government. Nay, it was the opinion of many learned and pious individuals, that if itinerant preachers continued to discourse upon matters pertaining to religion without proper and legal authorisation, it would cause the overthrow of the constitution of this kingdom in church and state, as by law established. The measures that were taken to prevent so terrible a catastrophe were certainly not such as anybody would in this day attempt to defend; but they had the effect of driving vast numbers of the really sincere and devout men of England across the Atlantic, to seek in trackless woods and on unknown shores the liberty of speech and action which England had denied them; and, more wonderful still, in the very heart of persecution and oppression, they sowed the seeds of a power that 100 years afterwards was to teach Britain, by the arm of flesh, the lessons of toleration which she should have ever been the first to respect and the last to forget. Amongst the exiles was Benjamin Franklin's father, Josias, who with his wife and three children settled in New England about the year 1682. After his arrival, four other children were borne him by the same wife. On her death he married another, by whom he had ten, making in all seventeen; and of the sons Benjamin was the youngest. He was originally intended for the ministry, for no better reason than that at an early age he had learned to read with remarkable facility. The poverty of the father fortunately saved his son from entering upon an unsuitable vocation. He could not afford to give him a collegiate education, and so instead of a minister

he determined to make him a soap-boiler and tallow-chandler, which occupation he himself had followed since his arrival in the colonies. Ben, however, did not by any means relish the change, when at ten years of age he was taken from school, and employed in filling moulds, cutting wicks, and going of messages, and there sprang up within him that inclination for a sea life which always haunts the minds of young gentlemen of tender years when they are not going on to their liking at home. Luckily, however, he managed to continue on peaceable terms with the soap and candles for two whole years, without offering his services to any of the New England sea-captains; but at the end of that period, his discontent rose to such a height, that his father began to fear that he really would take an abrupt leave, and enter himself as a cabin-boy in some sea-going vessel, as one of his elder brothers had already done. The worthy man then determined to discover his bent, and if possible to gratify it: He took him to see handicraftsmen of all trades at work, but nothing still seemed to have such attractions for Ben as books, and it was determined he should be a printer, it being believed, and rightly, that what he loved so much he would like to make. His brother had already started in Boston as a printer, and to him he was apprenticed. His taste for literature first showed itself in poetry, or perhaps we should rather say in versifying; and his brother, who appears to have invariably "had an eye to business," upon discovering this, employed him to write two ballads upon some events of recent occurrence, and then sent him about the streets to sell them. They had a prodigious run, which was highly gratifying to the author's vanity. From this time the taste for reading sprang up in him with extraordinary rapidity. He read a great many of the old English classics, but still possessed no facility in writing prose, until an odd volume of the "Spectator" fell into his hands, and so charmed was he with the style, that he forthwith determined to imitate it, and for this purpose practiced writing out the substance of what he read, and afterwards comparing it with the original. He thus gradually acquired greater fluency in composition; and perceiving where his own faults lay, was enabled to correct them. After some further desultory efforts of this sort, he at length had an opportunity of coming before the public in some essays, which he sent in anonymously to a newspaper. His brother started, in 1720 or 1721, entitled the *New England Courant*. This was the second newspaper that had ever appeared in America.

"Some of his friends," says Franklin "I remember, would have dissuaded him from this undertaking as a thing not likely to succeed, a single newspaper being, in their opinion, sufficient for all America. At present, however, in 1771, there are no less than twenty-five." What would he have said, could he have foreseen the prodigious degree of expansion to which the American newspaper press would have attained in 1853! This paper very soon fell under the censure of the assembly; Franklin's brother was imprisoned, and on his liberation was ordered to desist from publishing the *New England Courant*, and in order to evade the prohibition, it was determined that it should be carried on in Benjamin's name, and for this purpose his indentures were cancelled. He and his brother, however, could not agree. The latter was too fond of asserting the *droit d'aînesse*, and his dictatorial manner was intolerable to Benjamin, who at this period appears to have had no small opinion of himself. Their disputes were frequently brought before their father; he seems to have laboured to reconcile them with laudable solicitude, but the breach was too wide to be healed; and, in addition to this, Benjamin had resolved upon seeking his fortune through the world. He secretly took his departure, and reached Philadelphia with a Dutch dollar in his pocket, in his working dress,—his best clothes having gone by sea,—covered with dirt, and spent the first few hours after his arrival in eating a loaf and walking up and down the street. He soon got employment as a compositor, and attracted

the notice of the governor—a boasting, lying, deceitful man—who offered to set him up in business in Philadelphia, and persuaded him to set out for England to purchase types and a press, promising at the same time to give him letters that would make everything very pleasant and agreeable on the other side of the water. Franklin, believed him, and set sail, but without having anything of the oft-promised letters, which were always on the point of being sent on board, but never came. He crossed the Atlantic in the foolish, fond belief that they were in the mail-bag, and that when it was opened in England they would assuredly make their appearance. On his arrival, the captain handed him two or three, which looked very like introductions; but on presenting one of them to the individual to whom it was addressed, it was found to be from a roguish attorney, and he ran a narrow risk of being kicked for his pains, and found himself in England, without a friend, except a young man named Ralph, with his own love of literature, but without his steadiness or application.

Franklin, immediately on his arrival in London, found employment with a printer named Palmer, in Bartholomew-close. While here, a pamphlet he published, entitled a "Dissertation upon Liberty and Necessity, Pain and Pleasure," was the means of introducing him to the notice of a considerable number of literary men in the coffee-houses. His friend Ralph, however, was not equally successful. He appears to have been one of those unfortunates with whom nothing ever seems to succeed. Everything he undertook failed; and he continued to live upon loans from Franklin, until their common admiration of a young milliner caused a final breach between them, to Franklin's great joy, who now began to think of saving some money. He, therefore, entered another printing-office, Watts's, near Lincoln's-inn-fields; and while here, was the means of inducing his fellow-pressmen to abandon beer-drinking, in which many of them indulged to excess. He remained about eighteen months in London at this time, and, having accumulated a small sum, set sail once more for Philadelphia, where he arrived in October, 1726.

He now became a clerk to a Mr. Denham, a gentleman whom he met in England, and who was about to open a store in Philadelphia. In 1727, Denham died, and Franklin once more returned to his old occupation, by becoming manager of the business of a printer named Keimer, who had employed him before his departure for England. Keimer was dirty, knavish, and an insolent, vulgar brawler, who thought that the fact of his employing a man gave him the privilege of being insolent. It may be readily believed that Franklin and he did not long agree. He left him, and, in partnership with one of his fellow-workmen, started an establishment of his own. His companion, however, was idle and a drunkard, and soon left the business altogether in Franklin's hands. By unwearied industry, it was made to thrive and flourish: people passing in the street saw him at work after eleven at night, and long before most others had left their beds in the morning; and to show that he was not above his business, he wheeled home his paper in a barrow along the streets after he had obtained it from the stationer. He now started a paper, which soon obtained a large circulation for its ability and accuracy; and his reputation for diligence getting abroad, he obtained the printing of the public documents, and of the paper-money which was then beginning to be issued in America. In addition to this, he got into some of the most *spirituelle* society in Philadelphia, by joining a club for the discussion of scientific and literary questions. He was now out of debt, and doing well in the world, and thought it time to look around for a wife. His offers in various quarters were rejected, because a printer's business was not considered money-making. At last he returned to his first love, a young lady to whom he had been engaged previous to his departure for England; but, having ceased to correspond with her, she presumed that he had given up all intention of marrying her, which was really the case; and her parents then persuaded her to marry a worthless scamp, who had, as it afterwards appeared, another

wife living in England, and who soon abandoned her. Franklin and she got married; and they lived together, and prospered and were happy for many years.

Franklin was now a man of mark in Philadelphia, and in the year 1731 started a project for the establishment of a public library. Fifty persons subscribed forty shillings each, and agreed to pay ten shillings annually. As their number increased, the company was incorporated, in 1742, under the name of the "Library Company of Philadelphia." Similar institutions have since spread through all parts of the United States, and have done immense good in the advancement of knowledge and education. In 1732, Franklin commenced the publication of "Poor Richard's Almanack," famous for its maxims inculcating industry and frugality. In 1736, he entered upon his political career as clerk to the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, and was at last elected representative for Philadelphia; and in 1737 was appointed Postmaster of the State. His advance in public estimation was now rapid, and was consummated by his famous discoveries in electricity.

An account of several electrical experiments which had been made by some philosophers on the continent was sent to the Philadelphia Library Company in 1745, and Franklin immediately upon reading it engaged in a course of experiments himself, and communicated the results in a series of letters to his friend Collinson, the first of which is dated March 28th, 1747. In these he shows the power of points in drawing and throwing off the electrical matter, which had hitherto escaped the notice of electricians. He also made the grand discovery of a *plus* and a *minus*, or of a *positive* and *negative* state of electricity. Shortly afterwards, Franklin, from his principles of the plus and minus state, explained in a satisfactory manner the phenomena of the Leyden jar, which had previously so much perplexed philosophers. He showed clearly that the bottle when charged contained no more electricity than before, but that as much was taken from one side of it as was thrown upon the other; and that to discharge it nothing was necessary but to produce a communication between the two sides, by which the equilibrium would be restored, and that then no signs of electricity would remain. He afterwards demonstrated, by experiments, that the electricity did not reside in the coating, as had been supposed, but in the pores of the glass itself. In the year 1749, he first suggested his idea of explaining the phenomena of thunder-gusts, and of the Aurora Borealis, upon electrical principles. He pointed out many particulars in which lightning and electricity agree, and in the same year conceived the bold idea of attempting to

"—— grasp the lightning's pinion,
And draw down its ray
From the starr'd dominion."

His desire to be practically useful to his fellow-men here strikingly displayed itself. Admitting the identity of electricity and lightning, which, before his time nobody had been disposed to do, he suggested the idea of securing ships, houses, churches, &c., against the effects of thunder-storms, by the erection of long, pointed rods, which should ascend some feet above the most elevated part, and descend some feet into the ground or water. As points he knew to have great power in attracting and repelling electricity, he concluded that these rods would either repel the thunder-clouds, or drain off their electricity and carry it into the earth.

In the summer of 1752 he determined to test his theory by experiment. There was no tower in Philadelphia high enough for the erection of a rod; so he determined to try a kite. He made one of two cross sticks, and covered it with silk, and to the upright stick affixed an iron point. The string was of hemp except the lower end, which was silk. Accompanied by his son, to whom alone he had communicated his project for fear of ridicule, he went out on a common when there was an appearance of a thunder-gust. He raised the kite, saw a thunder-cloud pass over, and awaited the result with intense anxiety. At last he saw the loose fibres of the string move towards an erect position, and on presenting his knuckles to a key which was suspended at

the end of it, received a strong spark, and he found himself a thorough *savant*, with as good a title to fame as any man of his age.

The account of his discovery having spread abroad, letters and congratulations poured in upon him from all quarters. Learned men in all parts of Europe were anxious to correspond with him; learned societies conferred on him admission to their number. His letters were translated into most European languages, and into Latin.

The remainder of his time, until the commencement of the disputes between England and the colonies, was spent partly in philosophic investigation and partly in the political affairs of the States. He was invariably the foremost man in the furtherance of all schemes for the development of the resources of the country, the advancement of education, and the improvement of the condition of the people.

The defence of her colonies was a great expense to Great Britain. The most effectual mode of lessening this was, to put arms into the hands of the inhabitants, and to teach them their use. But England wished not that the Americans should become acquainted with their own strength. The least appearance of a military spirit was therefore to be guarded against; and, although a war then raged, the act of organising a militia was disapproved of by the ministry. The regiments which had been formed under it were disbanded, and the defence of the province entrusted to regular troops.

The disputes between the proprietaries and the people continued in full force, although a war was raging on the frontiers. Not even the sense of danger was sufficient to reconcile, for ever so short a time, their jarring interests. The assembly still insisted upon the justice of taxing the proprietary estates, but the governors constantly refused their assent to this measure, without which no bill could pass into a law. Enraged at the obstinacy, and what they conceived to be the unjust proceedings of their opponents, the assembly at length determined to apply to the mother country for relief. A petition was addressed to the king in council, stating the inconveniences under which the inhabitants laboured, from the attention of the proprietaries to their private interests, to the neglect of the general welfare of the community, and praying for redress. Franklin was appointed to present this address, as agent for the province of Pennsylvania, and departed from America in June, 1757. In conformity to the instructions which he had received from the legislature, he held a conference with the proprietaries who then resided in England, and endeavoured to prevail upon them to give up the long-contested point. Finding that they would hearken to no terms of accommodation, he laid his petition before the council. During this time Governor Denny assented to a law imposing a tax, in which no discrimination was made in favour of the estates of the Penn family. They, alarmed at this intelligence and Franklin's exertions, used their utmost endeavours to prevent the royal sanction being given to this law, which they represented as highly iniquitous, designed to throw the burden of supporting government upon them, and calculated to produce the most ruinous consequences to them and their posterity. The cause was amply discussed before the privy council. The Penns found here some strenuous advocates; nor were there wanting some who warmly espoused the side of the people. After some time spent in debate, a proposal was made, that Franklin should solemnly engage that the assessment of the tax should be so made, as that the proprietary estates should pay no more than a due proportion. This he agreed to perform, the Penn family withdrew their opposition, and tranquillity was once more restored to the province.

The mode in which this dispute was terminated is a striking proof of the high opinion entertained of Franklin's integrity and honour, even by those who considered him as inimical to their views. Nor was their confidence ill-founded. The assessment was made upon the strictest principle of equity; and the proprietary estates bore only a proportionable share of the expenses of supporting government.

After the completion of this important business, Franklin

remained at the court of Great Britain, as agent for the province of Pennsylvania. The extensive knowledge which he possessed of the situation of the colonies, and the regard which he always manifested for their interests, occasioned his appointment to the same office by the colonies of Massachusetts, Maryland, and Georgia. His conduct, in this situation, was such as rendered him still more dear to his countrymen.

He had now an opportunity of indulging in the society of those friends whom his merits had procured him while at a distance. The regard which they had entertained for him was rather increased by a personal acquaintance. The opposition which had been made to his discoveries in philosophy gradually ceased, and the rewards of literary merit were abundantly conferred upon him. The Royal Society of London, which had at first refused his performances admission into its transactions, now thought it an honour to rank him amongst its fellows. Other societies of Europe were equally ambitious of calling him a member. The university of St. Andrew, in Scotland, conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws. Its example was followed by the universities of Edinburgh and Oxford. His correspondence was sought for by the most eminent philosophers of Europe. His letters to these abound with true science, delivered in the most simple, unadorned manner.

During this visit he lodged in the house in Craven-street, Strand, represented in our engraving.

The discontents of the colonies increasing, Franklin was again appointed provincial agent, and sent to England. In 1776, he paid a visit to Holland and Germany, and in the following year to France, where he received the greatest marks of attention from the men of science, and was presented to the King Louis XV. When the petition of the Massachusetts Assembly was brought before the English Privy Council, Franklin attended as agent for the assembly, and received very rough treatment from Wedderburn, the attorney-general, a man of narrow mind and violent temper. All his efforts were insufficient to induce the ministry to change the measures, and he returned to America in 1775, just after the commencement of hostilities. He was sent to Paris, in 1776, to conclude the treaty by which the unfortunate Louis XVI. recognised the independence of the colonies; and was one of the American commissioners at the general treaty of peace in Paris, which followed the surrender of Cornwallis's army. He had in the interval been a member of Congress, and during the whole of that unfortunate struggle was distinguished by his energy, prudence, and patriotism, though he never allowed his political engagements to interfere with the prosecution of his scientific studies. It will for ever redound to his honour, that his last public act, in 1789, when bowed down by age and infirmity, was the presentation of a petition to the House of Representatives of the United States, on the 12th of February, 1789, praying them to abolish the slave-trade. He died on the 17th of April, 1790, after a long and useful life of eighty-four years and three months.

The following epitaph on himself was written by him many years previous to his death:—

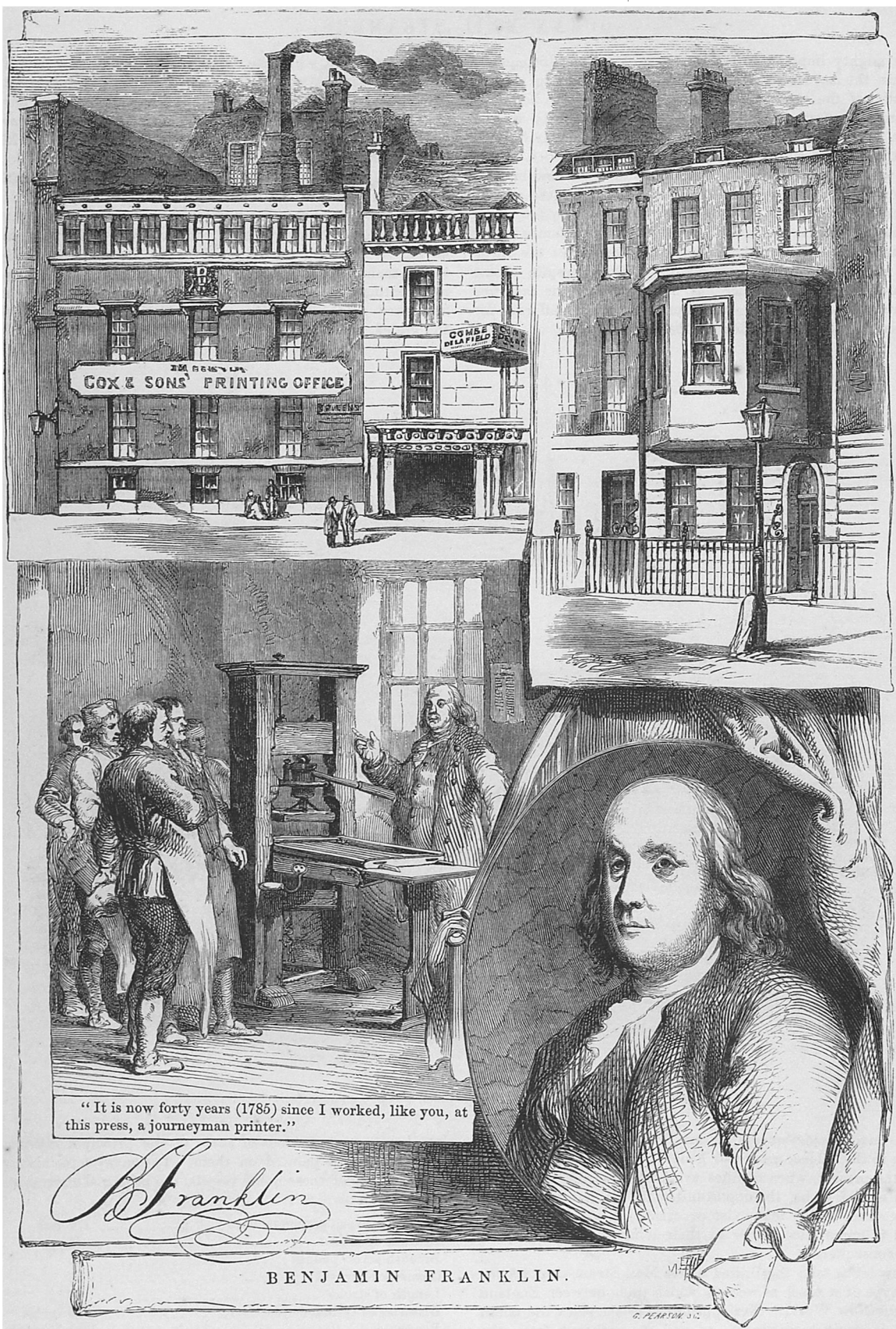
THE BODY

OF

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN,

PRINTER,

(like the cover of an old book,
its contents worn out,
and strip of its lettering and gilding)
lies here, food for the worms;
yet the work itself shall not be lost,
for it will (as he believed) appear once more
in a new
and more beautiful edition,
corrected and amended
by
THE AUTHOR.



COX'S PRINTING-OFFICE.—HOUSE, NO. 7, CRAVEN-STREET, STRAND, WHERE HE LODGED WHILE AGENT FOR PENNSYLVANIA.